

Critical international relations and the impact agenda

Article (Accepted Version)

Selby, Jan (2018) Critical international relations and the impact agenda. *British Politics*, 13 (3). pp. 332-347. ISSN 1746-918X

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Critical International Relations and the Impact Agenda

Forthcoming in *British Politics*, spring 2018

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Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Warwick Politics and International Studies Impact Conference, November 2016. Thanks to the conference organisers and attendees for their helpful comments, as well as to Cindy Weber, Alison Phipps and two anonymous reviewers for their great feedback.

Abstract

How should critical International Relations (IR) scholars approach the ‘impact agenda’? While most have been quite resistant to it, I argue in this essay that critical IR should instead embrace the challenge of impact – and that both IR as a field and the impact agenda more broadly would gain greatly from it doing so. I make this case through three steps. I show, firstly, that critical IR has till now been very much at the impact agenda’s margins, and that this situation contrasts strikingly with its well-established importance within IR teaching and research. I argue, secondly, that critical IR scholars both could and should do more impact work – that the current political conjuncture demands it, that many of the standard objections to doing so are misplaced, and indeed that ‘critical’ modes of research are in some regards better

suited than ‘problem-solving’ ones to generating meaningful change – and offer a series of recommended principles for undertaking critically-oriented impact and engagement work. But I also argue, thirdly, that critical social science holds important lessons for the impact agenda, and that future impact assessments need to take these lessons on board – especially if critical IR scholarship is to embrace impact more fully. Critical IR, I submit, should embrace impact; but at the same time, research councils and assessments could do with modifying their approach to it, including by embracing a more critical and political understanding of what impact is and how it is achieved.

Keywords

International Relations; impact; engagement; critical social science

Introduction

Impact and the research underpinning it are, to coin a phrase, ‘always for someone and for some purpose’ (Cox, 1981). They are always oriented to certain audiences or interlocutors (‘users’ and ‘beneficiaries’ in the contemporary jargon); they always serve or at least complement specific functions, interests and values; and they are also, it may be added, always situated – that is, practised by individuals and their collaborators in ways which are inevitably affected by social locations, statuses, networks and biases. Yet the social contexts of knowledge- and impact-making never fully determine what is produced. To the contrary, researchers – or at least those of us fortunate enough to be able to select and pursue our own lines of enquiry – possess

enormous licence to choose which audiences and interlocutors, and which functions, interests and values, we aspire to support and align our research with, and which not. As the sociologist Howard Becker put it five decades ago, ‘the question is not whether we should take sides, since inevitably we will, but rather whose side we are on’ (Becker, 1967: 239).

This essay takes Becker’s words as a starting point for examining the contemporary UK ‘impact agenda’ and International Relations’ contribution and response to it. It asks his ‘whose side?’ question not only of the impact agenda itself (‘whose side is the impact agenda on?’), but also of IR as a field (‘whose side is IR on, judging by its record of non-academic impact?’), and of critical IR specifically (‘whose side is critical IR on, judging by its record of non-academic impact?’). It asks these questions both empirically, especially in relation to the UK’s 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), and normatively, by reflecting on whether and how IR, and critical IR in particular, should engage with the impact agenda. Overall it argues, contrary to the vast majority of critical social science-informed reflections on the subject, that critical IR scholars should embrace the impact agenda much more fully than they have done thus far; and that both IR as a field and the impact agenda more broadly would gain greatly from them doing so.

We proceed through three steps. First, immediately below, I consider how International Relations in the UK, and especially its critical variants, have contributed to and engaged with the impact agenda since its introduction into the UK higher education landscape around 2010. This paves the way, secondly, for a set of reflections on how critical IR could and should approach impact, and on the central

principles as well as research and impact strategies through which it might do so. This then leads me, last, to argue that critical social science-informed insights hold important lessons for the impact agenda, and that future impact assessments need to take these lessons on board – especially if critical IR scholarship is to embrace impact more fully. These arguments are developed via an analysis of 43 REF 2014 impact case studies – all of the publicly-available IR-related case studies produced by the top fifteen impact-rated Politics and International Studies departments in the UK’s 2014 national research assessment (*Times Higher Education*, 2014) – as well as reflections informed by my personal experiences of undertaking, and supporting colleagues in undertaking, non-academic engagement.

It should be noted from the outset that by ‘critical IR’ I mean distinct two things, both of which follow from Horkheimer and especially Cox’s conceptualisations of ‘critical theory’ (Horkheimer 1972; Cox 1981), but are not limited or reducible to them. A first meaning is substantive: here critical research can be understood as work which is informed by the core methodological principles of historicism, holism and reflectivism (Jahn, 1998); and critical IR can in turn be understood as an umbrella term for those approaches which share these principles, especially work within the Marxist, post-structuralist, feminist and queer, and post-colonial traditions. That’s one meaning of ‘critical IR’ as used here. The second, by contrast, refers to ethos, positioning and audience, critical research in this sense being work which is, or at least thinks of itself as being, oppositional: as opposed to traditional conceptions of IR as a discipline, as critical of the dominant practices and structures of contemporary world politics, and as favouring instead various forms of radical or structural transformation. This does not mean, it should be stressed, that critical scholars all

agree on which structures or practices should be opposed, or indeed on how the world should be changed – far from it. Moreover, it should not be assumed that the two meanings above are coterminous: not all research within the above traditions is that politically radical, and not all positivist scholarship is as conservative as sometimes suggested. Hence my aim in considering the place of critical IR within the impact agenda is not to present a false unity, and still less to suggest that scholarship which declares itself ‘critical’ has a monopoly on insight or virtue, but rather to reflect on two overlapping but far from identical issues: the place of Marxist, post-structuralist, feminist and queer, and post-colonial traditions, and of opposition and of critique, within the impact agenda. It is also worth noting that, while my focus here is on critical scholarship within IR, many of the issues identified recur beyond this particular field, and relate to the problematic relationship between the critical social sciences and the impact agenda more broadly. To this extent, this essay is intended as a set of reflections on the critical social sciences – and definitely not as an argument about the singularity, let alone superiority, of IR.

The state of play

That critical social scientists, whether in IR or beyond, have for the most part been highly critical of the impact agenda is a point which does not need belabouring. In some cases the criticisms have been elements of broader critiques, whether of the worldwide transformation of higher education (Collini 2012) or of the UK’s research assessment system, as in Derek Sayer’s (2015) critique of the ‘rank hypocrisy’ and ‘insult’ of the REF. And in other cases the criticisms have been directed specifically at the idea and assessment of impact (e.g. Watermeyer 2016). Within IR, debates have

generally pitched calls for IR as a field and IR theory in particular to become more ‘policy relevant’ (e.g. Lepgold and Ninsic 2001), against counter-arguments, such as those from Johan Eriksson (2014) and Beate Jahn (2017), to the effect that theoretical work is politically relevant anyway. When critical IR has entered these debates in any explicit way, it has either been to support arguments for the value of theory (as in Jahn 2017) – with at least the sub-text that calls for greater ‘relevance’ and ‘impact’ overlook or undervalue the actual impact of IR theory – or to insist that critical IR illustrates IR’s relevance problem at its worst (Wallace 1996). Critical social science and critical IR specifically clearly have a troubled relationship with the impact agenda.

In parallel and no doubt partly owing to this, in practice critical IR scholarship has been very much at the margins of the impact agenda. The IR impact case studies produced by the top fifteen Politics and International Studies departments for REF 2014 make this abundantly clear. Not a single one of these 43 case studies is explicitly or even evidently underpinned by Marxist, post-structuralist, radical feminist or post-colonial scholarship. Not a single one mentions colonialism or imperialism. Not a single one of the political economy impact case studies refers to neo-liberalism. Only one case study addresses gender inequalities – and with an approach that is liberal rather than radical feminist, being focused on the representation of women in peace and security decision-making arenas (REF 2014a). Only one case study addresses racial discrimination (REF 2014b). And despite the fact that so many of the case studies centre on issues of peace, conflict and security, case studies that are clearly informed by critical security studies are entirely absent. Yet such concerns are not marginal within IR research: many of the above areas are among the most vibrant in the whole field. Unfortunately, one gets little sense of this

from the 2014 impact case studies. Indeed, on the evidence of these case studies alone, one could be forgiven for thinking that the sweeping changes that IR has gone through since the late 1980s – the decline of intellectual state-centrism, and the flourishing of assorted post-positivist, reflectivist and/or social approaches to researching the international – had barely occurred.

If this is so of the intellectual substance of the 2014 IR impact case studies, something similar also applies to their declared aims, targets and audiences, and to their narrative styles. Very few case studies represent their impact work as opposing, challenging or even aspiring to reform policy orthodoxies or established political structures or practices; instead most represent their impacts as simply additive, that is, as making additions to knowledge and through that adding to policy or practice. Consider the verbs used in the titles of the 2014 IR impact case studies. The most widely used is ‘shaping’ (occurring six times in the 43 case study sample), followed by ‘improving’ (five times), ‘influencing’ (five), ‘strengthening’ (four) and ‘informing’ (three). By contrast, only three of the 43 case studies headline their impact in reformist terms, referring to the ‘redesigning’, ‘reshaping’ and ‘reforming’ of understandings and agendas (REF 2014c, REF 2014d, REF 2014e); and only two use an explicitly oppositional verb to summarise their impact, one speaking of ‘countering’ and one of ‘challenging’ existing structures and tendencies (REF 2014f, REF 2014g). No case study titles speak of ‘confronting’, ‘condemning’, ‘resisting’, ‘problematifying’ or ‘transforming’ existing understandings and agendas – and none even refer to ‘inspiring’ change.

Moreover, the predominantly uncritical titles of the case studies is matched by the balance of their content. Only a quarter of the case studies make any mention at all of contesting or undermining existing understandings or policies; in all other cases, both research and impacts are exclusively represented in additive terms. Only one case study out of the 43 explicitly critiques an aspect of UK foreign policy (REF 2014h), while none clearly meet Eric Herring's criterion for 'activist IR scholarship', namely that the research should document the record of the state in creating human misery abroad (Herring 2006). In only four out of the 43 are Southern states or societies the case study's primary non-academic audience or interlocutor (REF 2014a, REF 2014c, REF 2014g, REF 2014i), even though a high proportion of the case studies relate to Western state and international organisation knowledge of, and interventions in, these states and societies. The large majority of the case studies revolve around impacts for government and international organisations; in only two case studies are non-governmental or activist organisations the primary beneficiaries (REF 2014j, REF 2014k), and in only one case, on community participation in Bradford, is the principal engagement with non-expert publics (REF 2014l). Only one case study documents resistance experienced in the course of impact and engagement work (REF 2014g). And last, very few of the case studies detail impact and engagement collaborations in any depth, especially noteworthy in this regard being the dearth of discussion of Southern partners, even in case studies relating to the global South. There is, in sum, only the most limited evidence of a critical social scientific ethos – a recognition of the inevitably political character of research, an insistence on the value of social and not just policy change, or an ambition to empower actors from the global South – within these impact case studies. To the contrary, as in sociology (Back 2015) the vast majority of IR case studies are essentially technical or mildly reformist narratives of

organic intellectuals helping Western governments and associated intergovernmental organisations to refine their techniques of liberal governance.

Lest this may sound too dismissive a verdict, several qualifications are in order. For one, the above is not intended as dismissal of ‘mainstream’ case studies (i.e. of those case studies not cited above), many of which provide rich and far from irrelevant evidence of positive contributions to policy processes; my concern instead is with the state of the field’s putatively critical approaches, and its critical ethos and imagination. Second, at least some of the patterns identified above can no doubt be explained on pragmatic, functional grounds: REF case studies are ultimately bureaucratic documents, which are written not for scholarly but for institutional (funding and reputational) purposes, and which in 2014 were often written, or at least edited, by especially appointed impact consultants or officers – such that it is hardly surprising that most of them are so apolitically framed. More broadly, the 43 case studies considered above are probably not a particularly representative sample of the diversity of impact and engagement work which was done by IR scholars during the preceding REF period, given how conservative institutions were in their selection of case studies, as the Stern Review among has others observed (Stern et al 2016: 23).

Indeed, many critical IR scholars are deeply committed to doing extensive extra-academic engagement and impact work – as is clear from my own institution alone. Anna Stavrianakis has provided evidence to the House of Commons select committee inquiry on the use of UK-supplied weapons in Yemen – contributing, among other things, to the UK government being compelled to reveal new information about its complicity in potential Saudi war crimes (Stavrianakis, 2016; CAEC 2016; HMG

2016). Lara Coleman has worked with peasant, trade union and human rights groups in Colombia to help develop human rights protection strategies and support legal cases against transnational corporations for violations of human rights (Coleman 2015; Carson et al 2015). Cynthia Weber has deployed insights from her work on queer IR theory to prompt senior UN officials to reflect on their working assumptions about gender, sexuality and their links to ideas of race, civilisation and progress (Weber 2016a, 2016b). Fabio Petito and colleagues have been drawing together coalitions of academics, activists and government officials in pressing for a multilateral agenda on freedom of religion and belief (Petito and Ferrari 2013; Petito et al 2016). And Peter Newell has, among many other things, worked with local and national activist movements to reflect on the possibility of, and strategies for achieving, a ‘rapid transition’ to a low-carbon economy (Simms and Newell 2017). Such examples – and others from across UK Politics and IR departments – show that critical IR scholars are already doing a fantastic diversity of engagement work well ‘beyond the ivory tower’.

For all this, the facts remain that the REF 2014 case studies provide the only collective, public record of the impact and engagement work of Politics and International Studies scholars, and that critical IR’s contribution to this public dataset is extremely limited. Some of this is no doubt the fault of bureaucratic and specifically REF processes – a question to which I return later. But it also clearly points to the poverty and in my view inadequacy of critical IR’s extra-academic engagements, providing further support for Milja Kurki’s conclusion that critical theory-informed research within IR has a worryingly poor record of facilitating progressive social change (Kurki 2011). So what might be done?

For a socially and politically engaged critical IR

The answer, in my view, is clear: that critical IR needs to rethink and retool itself as a socially and politically engaged as much as scholarly practice, to view achieving extra-academic impact as a core objective, and to embrace the impact agenda much more fully than it has done so far. My reasons for arguing thus are first and foremost political, rooted in the requirement for us to consider ‘whose side we are on’. In common with other social sciences, IR has always been an interested rather a disinterested practice, deeply entangled with political projects and worldly developments, above all questions of empire (Dyvik et al 2017). The current conjuncture, with its frightening concatenation of chronic problems and crises – the manifest failure of Western post-financial crisis economic orthodoxies; the staggering recent rises in global temperatures and extreme weather events; the generalised crisis in, and spill-over from, the Middle East; the assorted political flights into misogyny, authoritarianism, post-truth populism, racism and neo-imperial fantasy; and the associated weakening of supra-national norms and institutions – requires us to ask this ‘whose side?’ question anew. Moreover, the socio-economically privileged position of UK-based academics, or at least of those who have got beyond short-term contracts, is such that there is a clear responsibility to engage. This responsibility is on the one hand to our students, whose fees account for around half of the UK higher education sector’s total income and in turn wages. But it is also to society at large, especially given that, alone among UK public institutions, universities have till now been protected from the misery of austerity by the miracle of student debt. The evident beginnings of US-style ‘culture wars’ surrounding UK higher education – in which

universities and academics are repeatedly condemned for their left-wing proclivities and suppression of right-wing views (see e.g. the appalling Spiked 2017; the not much better Carl 2017; and almost every second edition of the *Daily Telegraph*) – are a further cause for reflection. Within these contexts, it cannot be appropriate for avowedly ‘critical’ scholarship – that is, scholarship which views knowledge production as an inevitably value-laden and interested activity – not to engage. I am not by any means suggesting that theoretical, conceptual and historical work are without value, or that all critical scholars should be entreated into doing impact work. But a critical IR which does not view social and political engagement as a central part of its mission is not worthy of the name.

Political reasons aside, there are also good intellectual reasons why critical IR should embrace the impact agenda. It is often assumed that what Cox (1981) rather unfortunately called ‘problem-solving’ is much better suited than ‘critical’ theory or research to achieving non-academic impact. This is no doubt in some contexts correct. In some domains, the production of models, projections or scenarios of social behaviour and change – that is, work which achieves its intellectual objectives simplifying and limiting all sorts of parameters, in precisely the manner described by Cox – can be of immense utility. However, within IR positivist research strategies have rather less public and policy value. It has repeatedly been observed, for example, that ‘the rise of simplistic hypothesis testing’ within US IR has ‘increased the gulf between academia and the policy world’ (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013: 448), and that very little of what mainstream US IR scholars do is politically useful or relevant (Desch 2015). Moreover, it is noteworthy that, of the REF 2014 case studies reviewed for this essay, very few involved any quantitative or modelling analysis.

There are no doubt many reasons for this evident contrast with other disciplines. But one key issue is surely the fact that, unlike in other disciplines, Politics and IR's subject matter revolves around themes – political and governance processes, power, state strategy and security – which policy audiences are, or consider themselves to be, experts on anyway. Given this crucial context, what is typically most valued by policymakers (and other audiences) from Politics and IR research is not abstracted models of policy processes or state interactions, however sophisticated these may be, but rather contextualised empirical intelligence on particular issues, plus comparative and theoretically-informed work which can help cast fresh light on existing challenges. Put differently, the most useful knowledge produced by Politics and IR scholars does not usually involve discipline-specific techniques or the generation of technical 'problem-solving' truths, but rather qualitative, contextualised and cross-disciplinary insights, i.e. precisely those forms of knowledge *not* associated with positivism (see e.g. Desch 2015). If this is right then, paradoxically, critical IR is far better equipped for producing politically-relevant knowledge that makes a difference, and for embracing the impact agenda, than its supposedly 'problem-solving' antithesis.

Of course, various objections could be and have been raised by critical scholars against the impact agenda – but most of these are in my view misplaced. Thus the oft-voiced complaint that impact is a neoliberal tool of governance (e.g. Vincent 2015; and more broadly Collini 2012) is simultaneously banal and irrelevant. It is of course true that the UK impact agenda arose from a government concern with ensuring 'value for money' and increasing national competitiveness within the context of post-financial crisis austerity policies. But governance regimes and organisations are

always internally contradictory, such that new policies are regularly subverted by those who have to implement them (Brunsson 2002); and in any case, all of the UK's national research assessments have been exercises in neoliberal governance, but this has not stopped – and maybe has even facilitated – the flourishing of critical scholarship within post-Cold War British IR. Something similar applies to the question of structure and agency. For while it is true that critical theorists typically understand world politics in quite structuralist terms, whereas the impact agenda requires and assesses academic agency, it is nevertheless also the case that structure and agency are not opposites – indeed structures are often revealed through agency (Knafo 2010), making engagement work a powerful addition to the critical IR research toolkit. Last, while critical scholars often stress the difficulty, and sometimes impossibility, of communicating across the academia-policy divide, and complain about the requirement to condense and dumb down findings, my response would be ‘get over yourselves!’: communication is central to what academics do; we already speak and write in multiple sites and genres (from the seminar room to journal abstract), constantly shifting how we do so in the process; and the dialogical challenges posed by the impact agenda are in essence no different. In each of these respects, many of the obstacles to critical impact work are more apparent than real.

Yet there is at least one respect in which this is not the case, and in which the impact agenda does pose particular challenges for the critical social sciences and, perhaps above all, critical IR: namely, that trying to contest entrenched social or policy orthodoxies, or having particularly heterodox interpretations, inevitably complicates the processes of obtaining access, of building trust and relationships, and of achieving impact. I have encountered this myself on numerous occasions. I have been attacked

in the most undiplomatic and personal terms in high political forums on climate security, after having the temerity to question received wisdoms on the conflict and security implications of climate change (see Selby and Hoffmann 2014). I have lost many of my working relationships with Palestinian water experts and institutions since going public with the fact that, for over a decade from 1998, the Palestinian Authority was routinely approving new Israeli settlement water infrastructures (Selby 2013). And just last year, myself and colleagues withdrew from a major piece of international organisation-commissioned research, after central elements of our analysis and most of our conclusions and recommendations were deleted without consultation by the organisation's staff – evidently because our analysis was too political. One does not need to be a critical social scientist to have experiences like this, of course. But a desire to reveal secrets, lies and flawed or prejudiced thinking, or to shed new light on crimes and injustices, makes conflict an ever-present feature of critical impact work.

How, then, should critical IR scholars approach impact? How should they navigate the many antinomies that it throws up – squaring a commitment to achieving impact with a recognition of the powerful obstacles to doing so; maintaining an ethos of critical detachment while simultaneously collaborating across the academic-non-academic divide; participating in a competitive and bureaucratically-defined 'impact agenda' despite their qualms about it; and so on? What, in short, should a socially- and politically-engaged critical IR involve?

I would suggest five broad sets of principles. A first, on the substance of *research*, is simply that critical IR should be guided by a commitment to contributing to

progressive social and political change, however conceived. Lest this sounds like a truism, let me add some flesh to this principle. It implies, in my view, that our research should be organised around and in response to substantive socio-political problems and issues, rather than first and foremost around intellectual let alone discipline-specific debates (and as a corollary, it implies a radically interdisciplinary or even anti-disciplinary understanding of what ‘research in IR’ involves). It means that we should get used to asking ourselves, our colleagues and our research students how we imagine our research might contribute to progressive social and political change, and that we should work to embed this aspiration into our institutional research cultures and day-by-day research practises, rather than approaching impact work as something discrete which is undertaken by a willing few, after their research on a subject has reached fruition. The idea of ‘achieving impact’ undoubtedly has bureaucratic as well as individualist, aggressive and masculinist connotations (Phipps 2017), which many find offensive and alienating. But we should not get fixated on this – especially as ‘achieving impact’ is in essence just a shorthand for contributing to change beyond academia.

A second suggested principle, on the nature of *impact*, is that contributing to change is an inherently frictional and conflict-laden activity, and should be approached as such by critical social scientists. In this respect, indeed, the word ‘impact’ is apposite, given that in Newtonian terms there is no impact without resistance. Change always involves conflict. Economic development has always involved the destruction of hitherto existing practices and structures, or at least their hybridisation in contact with the new; only in the neoliberal (or post-genocidal) imagination does development unfold on a blank slate and thus not involve the dismantling of traditional forms

(Cramer 2006). Likewise, the best research does not merely add new knowledge but also replaces established truths and paradigms; knowledge generation, as Roy Bhaskar emphasised, is an inherently critical exercise which progresses through critique (Collier 1994). And likewise with impact, which is rarely simply additive. For the most part, impactful social scientific research is such by virtue of identifying flaws within, or at least limitations to, existing socio-political knowledge and/or practice. Moreover, such research usually generates divergent responses; it is never simply uniformly accepted. In my own experience of producing politically relevant research, what typically occurs is that some ‘users’ welcome and applaud it, others reject and denounce it, still others seek to co-opt and utilise it for their own purposes – and for the most part one only has the faintest idea how ones research is being received. Doing critical impact work, in short, involves entering into opaque but always conflict-ridden social and political terrains, and thus inevitably involves the making not just of friends but also enemies. For the critical social scientist intent on doing impact work, there is no getting around this. Indeed I would go so far as to say that if your work is not, either directly or indirectly, generating negative reactions, it probably means that it is not having significant impact.

A third principle, on the nature of *engagement*, is that critical impact work is no different from other forms in requiring the cultivation of allies and constituencies. My central point here is that ‘speaking truth to power’ is not a practical strategy for affecting change, however gratifying a slogan it may be. Power will simply ignore criticism unless compelled to listen, and wielding truth counts for little if one has few allies. Moreover, in practice, those such as Said or Chomsky who advocate ‘speaking truth to power’ (see esp. Said 1994) in fact do nothing of the sort: their strategy is

instead to speak *about* power, and to do so *to* willing or semi-willing liberal and left-wing public audiences. Stated more theoretically, ‘power’ is not a uniform block, but a contested, differentiated and evolving terrain, comprised of multiple conflicting, as well as intersecting, hierarchies and strategies; while for its part ‘resistance’ is not a limited scholarly-led activity but one that is practised throughout politics and society. It thus follows that there are always potential allies or constituencies for critical impact work – whether these be new generations or idiosyncratic individuals within government departments; social movements and organisations committed to challenging established ways; or publics, whose lives have been deeply scarred by politics and power. In official impact discourse, such actors are usually referred to as the potential ‘users’ or ‘beneficiaries’ of research. But such framings are problematically apolitical, obscuring the inherently political and conflictual character of impact work. It is both more accurate and more strategically helpful, in my view, to think of these users as public or policy ‘allies’ or ‘constituencies’ for research. And it should also be emphasised, just in case it does not go without saying, that there is no reason whatsoever that impact needs to be conceived as ‘impact on policy’, as both REF regulations and various analyses (e.g. Bastow et al 2014) have recognised.

A fourth principle, on *specific engagement strategies*, is that engagement strategies need to be flexible, dynamic and context-sensitive; or, put differently, that it is not possible to set out a priori how engagement should be done. Difficult judgements often have to be made – about the relative merits of ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ strategies (Newell and Stavrianakis 2017); about the likely practical and reputational consequences of specific collaborations; about forms of collaboration (from those which involve a sharp distinction between ‘research’ and its ‘constituencies’, through

to those which blur this divide through academic-non-academic co-development); about what compromises to accept; and about when the intellectual or political consequences of engagements require one to walk away. Beyond this, I would make several general recommendations on engagement strategies and their translation into impact:

- Given that impact, when it occurs, is always to some degree accidental (resulting, for example, from a temporary coincidence of new research and a political process for which intellectual ballast is required), and always unfolds in ways which are beyond ones control (as an extreme example, some of my recent research may end up feeding climate-sceptic arguments, which is far from what I want or intend: Selby et al 2017a; and for discussion of this issue Selby et al 2017b), it follows that impact is ultimately less an accomplishment than an occurrence, and may sometimes be little more than a happenstance, and that both insouciance and humility about ‘achieving it’ are therefore in order.
- Given that pathways to impact are so often potholed with failures, and often come to dead ends, it makes sense to approach engagement not just as a means to impactful ends but also as an end in itself, plus as a way of embedding oneself within networks relating to ones research; engagement, in this sense, should in my view be thought of as immanent to the research process, and not as a step in some linear chain between research and impact.

- Given how often research is ignored and advances are rejected, especially if one is doing critical work, it follows that regular reflection on appropriate engagement strategies is crucial (as illustration, I have recently changed my approach to generating impact on climate security discourse: a complete failure of meaningful ‘insider’ conversations with government and NGO officials on this issue led me to instead prioritise research which will hopefully attract media attention and in turn perhaps prompt policymakers and NGOs to revisit their thinking: Selby et al 2017a is one early result of this revised research and engagement strategy).
- As a qualifier to this example, those doing impact work have a responsibility not to engage in the more questionable forms of ‘impact chasing’ – whether these involve exaggerating or over-simplifying research findings in order to attract media or policy attention, or competing with fellow academics for ‘ownership’ of impacts.
- Last, in light of the fact that critical impact and engagement work is inevitably political and conflict-laden, and given that this conflict can get quite dark – especially when in the form of social media abuse (see e.g. Phipps 2014) – those doing such work need to be aware of its potential emotional toll, while the academic communities and institutions around them need to be cognisant of their duties of care in this regard.

Returning to our list of principles, a fifth, on potential *impact case studies*, is that critical scholars should approach these as a stimulus to social and political

engagement while doing their utmost not to betray critical political sensibilities. This means, in my view, that case study documents should emphasise the role of partnerships and collaborations, especially those with other academics and marginalised groups, and should not just depict impact as a heroic, individual achievement; that they should forefront discussion of the political contexts of impact and engagement work, including by acknowledging resistance and failures; and that they should be explicit about theoretical underpinnings – since theory usually *is* an important underpinning, and since it will do the social sciences no good at all if theoretical reflection is thought to be irrelevant to its broader social purposes. Given that REF case studies are the only public record we have of our impact and engagement activity, it is important that we do not simplify and depoliticise them more than we have to. And, among other things, this means in my view that research support officers and consultants should not be writing impact case studies. Our institutions permitting, it is us academics who should have responsibility for case studies, and for recording our impact and engagement work with all the complexity and richness that it deserves.

Lessons for the impact agenda

Critical IR, I have argued, should embrace impact. But implicit within these arguments is also that funding councils, research councils, scholarly bodies and research assessments should consider modifying their approach to the impact agenda, including by embracing a more critical and political understanding of what impact is

and how it is achieved. By way of conclusion, I want to suggest four respects in which this is so, and out of this to offer four recommendations for reform.

First, the ‘hero scholar’ narrative style which predominates across the REF 2014 case studies is not just politically questionable; it is also essentially unrealistic (as well as contrary to the REF goal of assessing the impact of institutions, not individuals). Individualistic hero narratives inevitably focus on successes alone, leading to the stripping away of discussion of accident, resistance and context. Moreover, such narratives inevitably say little about engagement processes, whether these be the countless unacknowledged external conversations and collaborations which underpin impact, or the unrecognised labour of (mainly female) internal research support officers. Some of this is no doubt inevitable within the context of short documents submitted for research assessment. However, this hero scholar tendency could be reined in if greater emphasis were placed on processes of engagement, and slightly less on the impacts achieved. In my view, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) should make this a requirement for future impact case studies, and should seek to assess both impact and engagement.

Paralleling this, secondly, is the problematically apolitical style of the 2014 case studies – a style which assumes, or at least represents, the relations between academics and their users as inherently benign, learning-oriented and non-conflictual. And yet as indicated above, such representations are essentially unrealistic, since conflict, struggle and difference are inherent to, and maybe even the defining features of, social and political life; and since contributing to change always involves friction and resistance, if not destruction. Put differently, not only was there an unfortunately

widespread hero scholar tendency within the 2014 impact case studies; even worse, most of these case studies' scholarly heroes didn't slay any dragons. What we find in these case studies, instead, is a model of 'frictionless heroism', in which enemies are neither heard nor seen. What sort of heroism is this? How dull would fairy tales or great tragedies be if their main characters didn't have to slay any external or internal demons?

In my view, the rules and expectations for future research assessments should be adjusted in recognition of this problem. Institutions and case study authors might be encouraged to document and reflect on opposition and resistance, and even to include accounts of 'failure' – at least in cases where the engagement work in question is ambitious and potentially hugely transformative, but where impact is frustrated and limited by external factors and forces. As above, this suggests that case studies should not only be assessed on grounds of impact achieved; processes and experiences of engagement should be evaluated too (see also Upton et al 2014). An additional benefit here would be the production of more interesting case studies – accounts of politically engaged academia in practice rather than documents which read like they've been written by the same people responsible for university mission statements.

Third, as the analysis above hopefully makes clear, there is no level playing field when doing impact work. Put simply, proximity to power and alignment with its various interests can much more easily generate what looks like a powerful impact case study than work which seeks to contest it; and research which involves refining liberal techniques of governance is much more likely to result in warm 'impact testimonies' from the great and the good, or in invitations to sit on government-

commissioned panels, than research which identifies state corruption, collusion, hypocrisy or error. In practice, the critical IR scholar's experience of engagement typically involves the odd, perhaps fleeting opportunity for impact, alongside a much more consistent pattern of being dismissed, sidelined and ignored. Even those critical scholars who employ 'insider strategies', constructively engaging with policymakers and practitioners despite their differences with them, often find that this engagement only goes so far, and that at some point or another, conflict will break out and relationships cultivated over many years will break down. The REF 2014 impact assessment criteria of 'reach' and 'significance' did not allow for this, and as such were 'not on the side of', indeed were effectively biased against, critical scholarship. To fully encourage and open itself up to such scholarship, future REFs should in my view not only assess reach and significance; they should do this relative to the contexts – the uneven playing fields – within which impact is achieved.

Now, it may be that the REF 2014 Politics and International Studies sub-panel was sensitive to these issues, and that their judgements did take account of case studies' varying contexts and relations with power, despite there being nothing to this effect in the REF regulations. But even if this was the case – and I have no knowledge on this either way – there remains a problem. For unless there is explicit acknowledgement from HEFCE of the unevenness of the impact playing field, as well as licence for REF panels to take this unevenness into consideration when making their assessments, then universities and their research managers will in all likelihood continue to play safe by avoiding submitting the sort of contextualised, political, ambiguous and frankly realistic accounts of impact which are the typical corollary of engaged critical social scientific research.

None of this would be such a major problem if there existed sufficient spaces for academic dialogue on impact and engagement – but, by way of a final point, there do not. Consider the contrast with the ‘research output’ element of the REF. In this case, the source material – the hundreds of thousands of publications produced during each assessment cycle – is all published and available, access allowing; and is a living, developing body of work which is constantly being discussed, debated, critiqued and extended, with only a small proportion of it being subject to the closed, bureaucratically-defined process of research assessment. By contrast, on impact, the case studies are the only collective, public record which we’ve got. There is the occasional blog, of course, and the odd special issue. But if one wants to understand how critical IR, or indeed any other branch of research in the UK, is engaging beyond the ivory tower, it is basically to the joyless pages of the REF which one must turn. Is it any wonder, given this, that many academics feel so alienated by the impact agenda?

Addressing this problem could involve any number of things, from the embedding of dialogue and learning about impact experiences within the annual conferences and working groups of scholarly associations, through to the launch of dedicated peer reviewed journals on the subject – starting with, say, a *Journal of Political Engagement*. No doubt such steps would have their pitfalls. Increased scholarly dialogue on impact and engagement, equivalent to that which we find on the substance of our research, and on methodology and pedagogy, would clearly extend the reach of the impact agenda and further embed and normalise it within academic practice. And some would doubtless oppose this. But, in my view, if we want to

embed a commitment to contributing to progressive social change within academic practice, then that is precisely what we need.

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